The Landscape of Mohajir Politics

Abu Hayyan Saeed

Preface

The political history of Karachi, Pakistan's only megapolis, is often narrated through a limited lens: ethnic conflict, urban deprivation, and the rise of a single dominant political movement. Such narratives, while capturing significant social realities, frequently overlook the structural conditions and political engineering that shaped the city's political trajectory. This series of Articles seeks to address that gap by examining the neglected and suppressed alternatives within Mohajir politics, particularly focusing on the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), and by analyzing how state selection mechanisms contributed to the institutionalization of political violence and terrorism in urban Sindh.

The idea for this Research emerged from an attempt to understand a paradox: why did a non-violent and democratic political formation like MIT fail to survive in Karachi, while a more coercive political organization gained dominance and eventually became associated with violence? This question led to a deeper inquiry into the nature of political competition in semi-authoritarian contexts, where the state does not merely regulate political activity but actively shapes it. The experience of MIT suggests that political marginalization can occur not only through overt repression but also through subtle mechanisms of exclusion media invisibility, administrative obstruction, denial of resources, and the strategic withholding of political space.

As well as the question I left , who allowed huge -huge weaponization in Sindh especially Urban Sind for someone else and where was the State at that time ?

Over the course of this research, I realized that Karachi's political violence should not be understood solely as an outcome of ethnic

polarization or urban poverty. Instead, it must be examined as a structured outcome of state preferences and political selection. When political actors are rewarded for coercive capacity and punished for democratic autonomy, violence becomes a rational and durable form of political engagement. The result is not merely instability, but the transformation of political life into a system of coercion and control.

This series of Research articles is a compilation of three interrelated studies that together form a coherent narrative about Mohajir politics, state power, and the production of political violence in Karachi. The first article examines the marginalization of MIT as an alternative political trajectory. The second explores the process by which political violence became institutionalized through state selection and feedback mechanisms. The third consolidates these arguments by emphasizing the structural mechanisms that silenced democratic alternatives and shaped political outcomes in urban Sindh.

The intention behind this work is not merely to recount historical events but to offer a conceptual framework for understanding how political violence is produced and sustained. By recovering suppressed political alternatives, this book aims to expand the analytical field of Karachi politics and challenge deterministic interpretations of urban violence. It is my hope that this study will contribute to broader debates in political sociology, civil–military relations, and urban governance, and that it will inspire further research on democratic alternatives in contexts of managed political competition.

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The Path Not Taken: Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), State Selection, and the Marginalization of Non-Violent Politics in Karachi

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Abstract

The political history of urban Sindh, particularly Karachi, is commonly narrated through the rise and dominance of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). This dominant narrative, however, obscures alternative political trajectories that emerged during the same period but failed to survive within the prevailing state-centric political framework. This paper examines the emergence, ideological orientation, and subsequent marginalization of the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), founded on 12 March 1984, as a non-violent and non-aligned political alternative within Mohajir politics.

Using a comparative and interpretive analytical approach, the study argues that MIT's decline was not primarily due to organizational weakness or lack of popular relevance, but rather its refusal to conform to a model of politics favored by the Pakistani state , one that relied on coercion, control, and

proxy-based mobilization to counter political opponents, particularly the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). By situating MIT within the broader context of civil–military relations and urban political engineering, this paper highlights how non-conforming political actors are systematically excluded through mechanisms of political marginalization rather than overt repression.

The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of urban violence in Karachi by emphasizing the role of state preferences in shaping political outcomes and by recovering suppressed alternatives that could have redirected political mobilization toward democratic and non-violent pathways.

Keywords

Mohajir Politics; Urban Sindh; Karachi; Civil–Military Relations; Political Violence; State Patronage; MQM; MIT; Political Marginalization; Alternative Political Movements

1. Introduction

Urban Sindh experienced a profound political transformation during the early 1980s, as Mohajir political consciousness transitioned from student activism to organized party politics. Scholarly and journalistic accounts of this period overwhelmingly focus on the rise of the MQM, often portraying it as an inevitable outcome of ethnic grievances and urban marginalization.^1

This paper challenges that assumption by foregrounding the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), an alternative political formation that adopted a consciously non-violent and non-aligned strategy. The central research question guiding this study is: **Why did MIT fail to sustain itself politically while MQM rapidly expanded and consolidated power?**

2. Political Context: Urban Sindh in the Zia Era

During General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, the reorganization of political forces in Sindh posed a significant challenge to the state, particularly with the revival of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Urban Sindh, and Karachi in particular, emerged as a strategic arena where countervailing political forces were actively encouraged.^2

In this environment, political utility defined in terms of controllability, coercive capacity, and alignment with state objectives became a key determinant of political survival. Ethnic mobilization was not merely tolerated but selectively facilitated when it served broader security and political interests.^3

3. Emergence of MIT and MQM: Divergent Political Paths

MIT was established on 12 March 1984 under the leadership of Dr. Saleem Haider, one of the founding members of APMSO.^4 Shortly thereafter, on 18 March 1984, the MQM was formed under

the leadership of Azeem Ahmed Tariq, also a founding member of APMSO.^5

Although both organizations drew from similar social bases, their ideological orientations diverged sharply. MIT emphasized constitutionalism, democratic engagement, and the rejection of armed politics. MQM, on the other hand, adopted an organizational model that prioritized rapid mobilization, hierarchical control, and later, the normalization of coercive practices.^6

This divergence reflected not merely internal choices but differential compatibility with state preferences.

4. State Preferences and Political Selection

Available oral histories and secondary analyses suggest that emerging Mohajir leaderships were approached by state intermediaries and offered political patronage contingent upon their willingness to act as a counterforce to PPP mobilization in Sindh. These offers reportedly included access to resources, organizational space, and political protection.^7

MIT's leadership categorically rejected participation in armed or proxy-based politics. This refusal rendered the organization politically inconvenient within a system that privileged expediency over ideological autonomy. Conversely, MQM's willingness to operate within this framework facilitated its rapid institutional expansion.^8

5. Mechanisms of Marginalization: The Case of MIT

Rather than being eliminated through direct repression, MIT experienced what may be termed **soft political elimination**, characterized by:

- Sustained media invisibility
- Restrictions on organizational expansion
- Continuous surveillance and administrative obstruction
- Absence of political space rather than formal prohibition

Such mechanisms effectively neutralized MIT without attracting the costs associated with overt bans or military action.^9

6. Violence, Mobilization, and the MQM Model

The subsequent trajectory of MQM demonstrates how political violence in Karachi cannot be understood solely as spontaneous ethnic reaction. Instead, it reflects a structured outcome shaped by state tolerance, strategic necessity, and organizational design.^10

Youth mobilization under MQM increasingly became militarized, transforming political participation into a cycle of coercion and vulnerability, where the same actors empowered by violence eventually became its primary casualties..

7. The 1990s and MIT's Final Political Positioning

During the early 1990s, as tensions emerged between the state and MQM, MIT was again approached for potential collaboration. The organization's leadership, including Dr. Adil Saeed and other central figures, reaffirmed its rejection of armed politics and refused to become an auxiliary force in state operations.This reaffirmation of ideological consistency further entrenched MIT's marginal position but reinforced its identity as a principled political alternative.

8. Conclusion

The marginalization of MIT underscores a broader structural reality of Pakistani politics: political actors that resist alignment with state-defined priorities face exclusion irrespective of their democratic credentials. MIT's disappearance from mainstream political memory should not be mistaken for irrelevance; rather, it reflects the limits imposed on autonomous political agency.

Revisiting such suppressed alternatives is essential for understanding not only what occurred in urban Sindh, but what was systematically prevented from occurring. MIT represents a

path not taken—one that might have redirected political mobilization away from violence and toward democratic engagement.

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From Marginalization to Militarization: State Selection, Political Violence, and the Structuring of Urban Politics in Karachi (1985–2025)

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Abstract

Political violence in Karachi is frequently explained as the outcome of ethnic polarization, urban deprivation, or spontaneous collective anger. While these factors provide partial insight, they fail to explain why violence became institutionalized, durable, and politically rewarding over time. This paper argues that political violence in Karachi was not an unintended by-product of ethnic mobilization, but a structurally induced outcome of selective state patronage that privileged coercive capacity over political autonomy.

Building on earlier research on the marginalization of non-violent political alternatives in Mohajir politics, this study examines how the exclusion of autonomous actors contributed to the monopolization and subsequent militarization of urban political mobilization between the mid-1980s and early 2000s. Using a qualitative and interpretive analytical approach, the paper traces the evolution of a state–violence feedback loop in which political actors were incentivized to adopt coercive organizational models to remain viable.

The findings suggest that violence in Karachi should be understood not as a breakdown of politics, but as a specific form of politics produced through state selection mechanisms. The paper contributes to broader debates on civil–military relations, urban governance, and the political economy of violence in semi-authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

Karachi; Political Violence; Urban Politics; Civil–Military Relations; State Patronage; Ethnic Mobilization; Pakistan; Political Sociology

1. Introduction

Karachi has long occupied a central place in discussions of political violence in Pakistan. From ethnic clashes and targeted killings to large-scale security operations, the city has been portrayed as a space of perpetual instability. Conventional explanations attribute this condition to ethnic fragmentation, rapid urbanization, or socio-economic inequality. While these explanations capture important contextual dynamics, they offer limited insight into why violence became a normalized and durable feature of political mobilization rather than a transient phase.^1

This paper advances a different argument: political violence in Karachi was neither accidental nor inevitable. Instead, it was produced through a process of state selection, whereby political actors demonstrating coercive capacity were rewarded with space, protection, and relevance, while non-violent and autonomous alternatives were systematically marginalized.

The central research question guiding this study is:

How did selective state patronage contribute to the institutionalization of political violence in Karachi from the mid-1980s onward?

2. Political Violence Beyond Spontaneity: A Conceptual Framework

Political violence is often framed as a failure of political institutions or as a breakdown of social order. However, scholarship on contentious politics and state formation suggests that violence can also function as a political resource—a means of negotiation, control, and visibility (Tilly, 2003; Migdal, 2001).2

In semi-authoritarian contexts, where political competition is managed rather than open, states tend to favor actors who can deliver:

- Territorial control
- Rapid mobilization
- Predictable compliance

Under such conditions, violence becomes a form of political capital. Actors unwilling or unable to deploy it face structural disadvantages, regardless of their popular legitimacy or democratic orientation.

3. From Exclusion to Monopoly: Narrowing the Political Field

The mid-1980s marked a turning point in urban Sindh politics. As documented in prior research, non-violent political alternatives within Mohajir politics—most notably the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT)—were gradually excluded from political relevance through media invisibility, administrative obstruction, and political neglect.^3

This exclusion had two critical consequences:

Reduction of Political Choice:
With autonomous alternatives marginalized, political grievance increasingly flowed through a single dominant channel.

Monopolization of Representation:
The absence of competition enabled the dominant actor to define both the language and method of political engagement.

Under such conditions, coercive practices were no longer one strategy among many; they became the primary means of sustaining political relevance.

4. Organizational Militarization and Youth Mobilization

As political space narrowed, organizational survival increasingly depended on internal discipline, territorial enforcement, and demonstrable strength. This led to the gradual militarization of political structures, particularly at the neighborhood level.

Youth mobilization played a central role in this transformation. Political participation increasingly offered:

- Identity and belonging
- Economic opportunity in the absence of formal employment
- Protection within violent urban environments

Over time, activism shifted from political advocacy to enforcement. Participation in violence was no longer exceptional; it became routine as part of organizational life.

This transformation did not occur in a vacuum. It was shaped by incentives embedded within the broader political environment.

5. The State–Violence Feedback Loop

The interaction between state institutions and violent political actors produced a self-reinforcing cycle:

Tolerance and Patronage:
Violence was selectively tolerated when it served political objectives or contained rival forces.

Expansion of Coercive Capacity:
Tolerated violence enabled actors to consolidate territorial control and organizational discipline.

Selective Intervention:
Periodic crackdowns targeted excesses without dismantling the underlying political structure.

Normalization:
Violence became an accepted, if unofficial, component of urban governance.

This feedback loop ensured that violence remained politically productive even when publicly condemned.

6. Human Costs and Governance Breakdown

The institutionalization of political violence imposed profound human and civic costs. Youth drawn into coercive politics became both instruments and casualties of violence. Neighborhoods were criminalized, civic institutions eroded, and trust in formal governance collapsed.

Importantly, these outcomes were not unintended consequences. They were foreseeable results of a political system that rewarded coercion while excluding democratic alternatives.

7. Counterfactual Analysis: The Path Not Taken

Counterfactual analysis offers insight into what was structurally foreclosed. Had non-violent political alternatives survived, urban mobilization might have taken different forms:

- Issue-based bargaining rather than territorial enforcement
- Cross-ethnic urban coalitions
- Institutional negotiation over resource distribution

The absence of such pathways should not be mistaken for their impossibility. Rather, it reflects deliberate political selection.

8. Discussion: Violence as Structured Political Practice

This analysis challenges narratives that portray Karachi's violence as irrational or culturally embedded. Instead, violence emerges as a rational response to structured incentives within a constrained political environment.

When political survival depends on coercive capacity, violence ceases to be exceptional. It becomes normalized, institutionalized, and self-perpetuating.

9. Conclusion

Political violence in Karachi was not the collapse of politics but a specific configuration of it—one shaped by state preferences, selective patronage, and the exclusion of autonomous actors. The marginalization of non-violent alternatives narrowed political choice and incentivized militarized mobilization, producing long-term instability.

Understanding Karachi's trajectory therefore requires moving beyond explanations rooted solely in ethnicity or urban deprivation and toward an analysis of how political systems

reward certain forms of action while foreclosing others. The tragedy of Karachi lies not only in what occurred, but in what was systematically prevented from occurring.

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Silenced Alternatives in Urban Sindh Politics: The Case of Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT) and State-Structured Political Outcomes in Pakistan

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Abstract

The political history of urban Sindh, particularly Karachi, is overwhelmingly narrated through the rise, dominance, and fragmentation of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). This dominant narrative, however, marginalizes alternative political trajectories that emerged concurrently but failed to survive within Pakistan's state-centered political framework. This paper examines the emergence, ideological orientation, and systematic marginalization of the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), founded in March 1984, as a non-violent and non-aligned alternative within Mohajir politics.

Employing a qualitative and interpretive analytical approach, the study argues that MIT's decline cannot be adequately explained by organizational weakness or lack of popular relevance. Instead, it contends that MIT was rendered politically nonviable due to its refusal to conform to a model of political engagement favored by the Pakistani state—one that emphasized coercion, control, and proxy-based mobilization to counter perceived political threats, particularly the resurgence of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in Sindh.

By foregrounding MIT's experience, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of political violence in Karachi and highlights how state preferences shape political survival by selectively empowering compliant actors while marginalizing autonomous, non-violent alternatives.

Keywords

Mohajir Politics; Urban Sindh; Karachi; MIT; MQM; Civil–Military Relations; Political Violence; State Patronage; Political Marginalization; Alternative Political Movements; Pakistan=

1. Introduction

Urban Sindh underwent a profound political transformation during the early 1980s as Mohajir political consciousness transitioned from student activism to organized party politics. Existing academic and journalistic literature largely treats the emergence of the MQM as the inevitable outcome of ethnic marginalization, urban deprivation, and identity-based mobilization. While these factors are undoubtedly relevant, such accounts risk presenting a deterministic narrative that overlooks alternative political possibilities.^1

This paper challenges the inevitability thesis by examining the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek (MIT), an organization that emerged from the same socio-political milieu as the MQM but adopted a fundamentally different political strategy. The central research question guiding this study is: **Why did MIT fail to sustain itself politically while MQM rapidly expanded and consolidated power in urban Sindh?**

The paper argues that the answer lies not primarily in societal demand or organizational capacity, but in the alignment or lack thereof between political actors and state preferences.

2. Political Context: Urban Sindh under Zia-ul-Haq

The military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) reshaped Pakistan's political landscape through controlled political participation, selective repression, and strategic patronage. In Sindh, the gradual reorganization of the Pakistan Peoples Party posed a persistent challenge to the regime's legitimacy and control.

Urban Sindh, particularly Karachi, assumed strategic importance as a site where countervailing political forces could be cultivated. Ethnic and urban mobilization was not merely tolerated but selectively encouraged when it aligned with the regime's broader objectives. Within this context, political viability became closely tied to an actor's perceived utility in countering opposition forces.^2

3. Emergence of MIT and MQM: Shared Origins, Divergent Strategies

MIT was established on 12 March 1984 under the leadership of Dr. Saleem Haider, a medical graduate of Sindh Medical College and founding member of the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO). Six days later, on 18 March 1984, the MQM was formed under the leadership of Azeem Ahmed Tariq, a pharmacy graduate of the University of Karachi, also a founding member of APMSO.^3

Both organizations drew support from similar urban Mohajir constituencies and emerged from overlapping activist networks. Despite these shared origins, their political trajectories diverged sharply.

MIT articulated a commitment to constitutionalism, democratic engagement, and the explicit rejection of armed politics. MQM, in contrast, pursued rapid organizational expansion through a highly centralized structure that later incorporated coercive and militarized elements. This divergence reflected not merely internal ideological preferences but differing degrees of compatibility with the prevailing state logic.

4. State Preferences and Political Selection

In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts, the state does not act as a neutral arbiter among competing political actors. Instead, it actively shapes political outcomes by selectively empowering groups that align with its strategic objectives. In urban Sindh during the 1980s, these objectives included containing the PPP and maintaining control over volatile urban spaces.

Available oral histories and secondary sources suggest that emerging Mohajir political actors were approached through intermediaries and offered political patronage, organizational space, and protection in exchange for cooperation. MIT's leadership categorically rejected participation in armed or proxy-based politics, viewing such engagement as incompatible with democratic principles and long-term community interests.^4

This refusal rendered MIT politically inconvenient rather than overtly threatening—an important distinction that shaped the method of its marginalization.

5. Mechanisms of Marginalization: Soft Political Elimination

Unlike organizations that are banned or violently suppressed, MIT experienced a process of gradual political neutralization that may be conceptualized as soft political elimination. This process included:

- Systematic media invisibility and exclusion from mainstream political discourse
- Administrative and informal restrictions on organizational activity
- Continuous surveillance and intimidation without formal prohibition
- Denial of access to political resources routinely available to favored actors

Such mechanisms effectively prevented MIT from translating its ideological clarity into mass political presence while avoiding the costs associated with overt repression.^5

6. The MQM Model and the Normalization of Violence

The trajectory of MQM illustrates how political violence in Karachi cannot be understood solely as an expression of spontaneous ethnic grievance. Rather, it reflects a structured political outcome

shaped by state tolerance, strategic necessity, and organizational design.

Under this model, youth mobilization increasingly became militarized, transforming political participation into a cycle of coercion and vulnerability. While this approach yielded short-term political gains and territorial control, it also entrenched violence as a defining feature of urban politics, with devastating long-term consequences for the very communities it claimed to represent.^6

7. The 1990s: Reaffirmation of MIT's Political Position

During the early 1990s, as tensions emerged between the state and MQM, MIT was reportedly approached once again for potential collaboration by the state. The nationalist young leadership of the MIT at that time made a bluntly clear statement to the army leadership: **"You have prepared a thorny field in the form of MQM; cut it yourself."**^7

At that time the organization's leadership and other central committee members reiterated its rejection of armed politics and refused to act as an auxiliary force in state-led operations. This reaffirmation of ideological consistency underscored MIT's commitment to political autonomy but further entrenched its marginal status within a system that prioritized compliance over principle.

8. Discussion: Political Autonomy and State Limits

MIT's experience highlights the structural limits placed on autonomous political agency in Pakistan. Political survival is often contingent not on democratic legitimacy or social relevance, but on alignment with state-defined priorities. Actors that resist such alignment are not necessarily defeated in open contestation; rather, they are rendered invisible.

The absence of MIT from mainstream political histories thus reflects not historical insignificance but structural exclusion.

9. Conclusion

The marginalization of the Mohajir Ittehad Tehreek offers critical insight into how political outcomes in urban Sindh were shaped during the 1980s and 1990s. MIT represents a suppressed alternative ,a non-violent, non-aligned path that was systematically excluded from political viability.

Revisiting such marginalized trajectories is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of political violence, state power, and missed democratic possibilities in Pakistan. MIT stands as a reminder that the dominance of violent political models was not inevitable, but produced through deliberate political selection.

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Critical Assessment of Mohajir Politics

1. Mohajir Politics as a Response to Urban Marginalization

Mohajir politics emerged from real historical conditions: migration, social displacement, identity crisis, and rapid urbanization. Karachi, as a megacity, became the site where Mohajirs faced competition for jobs, housing, and social status. In this context, political mobilization was a rational strategy to secure rights and recognition.

Key point:
Mohajir politics was *initially a legitimate expression of collective grievance and political aspiration*.

2. The Role of the State in Shaping Mohajir Politics

Your research highlights a crucial insight: **state preference shaped which political forms survived.** The state needed a political force that could counter the PPP and control Karachi. This created incentives for political actors to align with state objectives, even if that meant using coercion or violence.

Key point:
Mohajir politics became shaped by **state selection**, not merely by social demands.

3. The Marginalization of Democratic Alternatives

The MIT case shows that there were **non-violent, democratic alternatives** within Mohajir politics. MIT rejected violence and state proxy politics, but was systematically marginalized through invisibility, administrative obstacles, and lack of resources.

Key point:
The dominance of violent politics was not inevitable; it was produced by the **exclusion of democratic alternatives**.

4. Militarization and the Normalization of Violence

Once the political field narrowed, violence became a political tool and eventually the *primary mode of political participation*. The MQM's transformation into a coercive structure reflects how politics can become militarized when survival depends on force.

Key point:
Mohajir politics became a *political system based on coercion*, not just a movement based on identity.

5. Mohajir Politics and Urban Governance Failure

The militarization of politics weakened civic institutions, damaged urban governance, and created a cycle of instability. The city became governed by coercive networks rather than democratic institutions.

Key point:
Violent politics in Karachi contributed to **state failure in urban governance**.